

COUNCIL – 4 MARCH 2024

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF PUBLIC

Executive Summary

The following questions have been received from Members of Public. The individuals who raised the questions have been invited to attend the meeting. Formal responses have been provided by the Leader of the Council and the Deputy Leader of the Council.

Question 1 – Ellie George, Citizens Advice Woking

“A huge amount of my work at CAW goes towards preventing and dealing with homelessness. We help clients with housing benefit applications, negotiate repayments for rent arrears to avoid evictions and navigate those facing or experiencing homelessness through the process of securing new accommodation. This includes a large number of vulnerable clients who struggle to engage with their landlord and relevant authorities. How will the council deal with increased demand for housing and homelessness support with the likely reduction in the services CAW will be able to offer?”

Supporting Statement

“From November 23rd, 2023, to February 15th, 2024, Citizens Advice Woking helped 146 clients either threatened with homelessness or experiencing actual homelessness and 46 clients going through the Local Authority Homelessness process. Furthermore, we advised 65 clients on dealing with rent arrears. We also assisted 54 clients with Housing Benefit issues and applications, with 35 of those cases specifically related to Local Authority housing.”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“Firstly, I’d like to thank volunteers from Citizens Advice Woking (CAW) for their questions. The Council has worked in partnership with CAW for many years and value the important services that their staff and volunteers provide.

I want to begin my response by reiterating Woking Borough Council’s (WBC) financial position and the reasons why we’ve needed to review funding to CAW.

The Council is in an extremely vulnerable financial situation which is so significant that it will need substantial and ongoing support from the Government in 2024/25 and for the foreseeable future. It is in this context that the Council has had to agree significant service savings for 2024/25 of over £8.5m.

Going forward, the Council will only be able to provide non-statutory services (discretionary services) where they can be provided without any subsidy from the Council. Unfortunately, grant funding to voluntary organisations is a non-statutory service.

The Council has been working with CAW since September 2023 to understand the potential impact of its proposed funding reductions and to discuss what mitigations could be put in place. This has included support to find alternative funding streams, with WBC brokering a meeting between CAW and the National Lottery.

Whilst the Council is no longer able to provide core funding to CAW, through these discussions, we have been able to agree several areas where we will continue to work in partnership and provide alternative funding streams. They include:

- £10,000 funding to provide the Court Desk Service from the Government's Homelessness Prevention Grant.
- £24,500 funding for the Ukrainian Hub and Syrian and Afghan Refugee Support.
- £30,000 funding from UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UK SPF) to support CAW to transition to a new business model.
- £50,000 from the Council's Hardship Fund for a Hardship Support co-ordination package. The full details of what will be delivered under this funding have been agreed with the CEX of CAW and are included within this meeting's [budget papers](#).
- WBC will also continue to allow CAW to use office space at Provincial House, alongside covering service charges and providing discretionary business rates.

I hope that this package of funding (which totals approximately £229,000) combined with CAW's alternative fundraising efforts, will enable the organisation to continue to offer much valued services to Woking residents.

The Council is confident that CAW will be able to adapt its business model, supported by UK SPF and alternative funding streams, and continue to provide some volunteer-led housing advice services. In recognition of the preventative work of CAW, the Council will also continue to fund CAW to provide the Court Desk service from its Government Homelessness Prevention Grant. Our Housing Options Team will continue to offer a statutory Homelessness service. The Council has a performance management system where we monitor performance against spend and we take decisions regarding our statutory responsibilities in the context of our financial position, to ensure that our resources continue to be allocated towards our strategic priorities."

Question 2 – Ellie George, Citizens Advice Woking

"Much of my volunteer work involves housing issues directly related to Local Authority properties which Council employees manage. I help a range of vulnerable clients, who find it difficult to engage with relevant parties, to address a range of problems with their Local Authority housing – arrears, mould, repairs, emergency heating and more. What is the council's plan to address some residents' additional needs for support with Local Authority housing given Citizens Advice Woking's future diminished service provision?"

Supporting Statement

"In the period November 23rd, 2023, to February 15th, 2024, Citizens Advice Woking helped 94 clients to solve issues specifically related to Local Authority housing."

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

"As set out in the answer to question one, the Council has still committed significant funding to Citizens Advice for 2024/25, even though there has been a reduction from previous years. As part of the Hardship Support co-ordination package, the Council and CAW will look to strengthen the advice offer offered by alternative voluntary, community and faith sector (VCFS) providers (such as Christian's Against Poverty, The Lighthouse etc). If alternative organisations can increase their

capacity for providing general advice services, it is hoped that this could allow CAW to continue to deal with more complex queries. The Council also trusts that CAW will be able to prioritise its services so that the most vulnerable residents with additional needs can still access support. As a Council, we are implementing a comprehensive Housing Improvement Programme, which we expect to make the service more customer-focused and proactive in dealing with the issues you have mentioned.”

Question 3 – Ellie George, Citizens Advice Woking

“Many of my clients, coming to Citizens Advice Woking, require additional support with ensuring they pay their Council Tax, reducing the number of lengthy Court processes that the Council is required to initiate. I negotiate payment plans for my clients to pay back their Council Tax arrears, and many of them need help applying for Council Tax Reductions, Discounts and Exemptions. How does the Council plan to mitigate an increase in Council Tax queries and arrears that will inevitably come as a result of Citizens Advice Woking’s expected limited service provision?”

Supporting Statement

“In the period November 23rd, 2023, to February 15th, 2024, Citizens Advice Woking advised 73 clients on their Council Tax arrears and 80 clients regarding a Council Tax Deduction.”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“The Council’s 100k Hardship Fund will provide support to those residents who may have difficulty paying their Council Tax. For those who are able to go online, we have redesigned Council Tax pages. Descriptions and guidance are now easier to understand and supports personal budgeting. Residents can more easily set up payment plans, choose payment methods and make payments online than they were previously. We have already seen increased use and more upgrades to the website and Council Tax services are planned to improve accessibility. We realise some residents cannot use online services, or need additional advice and support. This is why staff members in the customer services team are being given additional training to deal with Council Tax queries, in order to advise and resolve queries more effectively.”

Question 4 – Kay Riley, Citizens Advice Woking

“A major concern of mine is the additional support required by a considerable proportion of CAW clients. Our clients often have language issues, literacy issues, limited digital skills, mental health conditions or learning disabilities. They need help understanding their situation, engaging with relevant authorities, and taking action to improve their circumstances. The most vulnerable clients require home visits as, due to severe disability and lack of support, they are unable to leave their homes. What plan does the Council have in place to accommodate the complex additional needs of so many of CAW’s clients if CAW must limit its services?”

Supporting Statement

“Between April and September 2023, 63% of people CAW saw had a disability or long-term health condition. 20% of these clients also have a long-term mental health condition. CAW’s specialist caseworkers and trained volunteers undertake a range of actions for vulnerable clients, including negotiating and advocating for clients with relevant authorities, filling in forms and working closely with support and social workers. Critically, many of our advisers have developed the long-term, trusting relationships with vulnerable clients that are needed for these clients to engage openly. Additionally, approximately 25% of our clients do not have English as a first language and

cannot read or write in English. Citizens Advice Woking are able to provide face to face support in 15 different languages, often at the first visit from the client.”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“As stated above, as part of the Hardship Support co-ordination package, the Council and CAW will look to strengthen the advice offer offered by alternative VCFS providers (such as Christian’s Against Poverty, The Lighthouse etc). If alternative organisations can increase their capacity for providing general advice services, the Council is confident that this could allow CAW to continue to deal with more complex queries. The Council also trusts that CAW will be able to prioritise its services so that the most vulnerable residents with additional needs can still access support. The Council continues to offer floating support to homeless clients as well as supporting digital inclusion for the most vulnerable.”

Question 5 – Kay Riley, Citizens Advice Woking

“Anticipating a reduction of services at Citizens Advice Woking after 1st April, what plans do the council have to provide extra staffing for the increased footfall to the council offices? Council Staff often direct residents over to Citizens Advice Woking for help. What plans have the Council put in place if this option is not open to them?”

Supporting Statement

“Citizens Advice Woking currently opens to the public from 10am to 4pm for drop in clients. For many this is the first point of contact as many clients are unable to go on-line to use the on-line enquiry form and prefer face to face engagement. Many bring in forms for completion, letters from the council that they are unable to read or understand. Receptionists are on duty throughout that period, often able to support clients for whom English is not their first language. There is often a queue even with two receptionists and if CAW have to adopt a no drop in service clients will see the council offices as the place to go too for help in the first instance.”

Reply from Councillor Will Forster

“Whilst the Council is focussed on continuing to improve its customer services offer, it does not have any plans to increase staffing numbers. Footfall currently makes up less than 1% of the queries WBC gets a month, the vast majority being online or over the phone. WBC offices will remain open to residents with access to relevant staff members, as is the case today. We recognise that CAW may not be able to offer the same level of provision as in the past. We anticipate the Hardship Support co-ordination package will develop the capacity of other organisations to provide alternative advice.”

Question 6 – Kay Riley, Citizens Advice Woking

“At the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Monday 29th January, the Council set out a New Council Vision in the accompanying slides. The Council has stated unambiguously that it is unable to spend money on services that residents value and want to keep, (e.g. Citizens Advice, Bustler, St Mary’s day care centre) and is unable to spend on anything other than essential services. Will the Council be amending the new Vision and Mission to clarify that it cannot in fact deliver any new services that make a difference to people?”

Supporting Statement

“Vision Statement: A financially and environmentally sustainable Council, delivering services that residents value in every part of the borough.

Mission Statement: A trusted and transparent Council that:

Lives within its means

Is focused on services that make a difference to people in the Borough

Works in partnership with the community to deliver positive outcomes

Continually engages with residents to design more efficient and effective services

Invests in talent to deliver for Woking’s future”

Reply from Councillor Ann-Marie Barker

“In 2024/2025 the Council will continue to spend money on some non-statutory services, such as careline, community meals, leisure services, Bustler and Citizens Advice but these services must be self-financing in future. This is in line with the Council’s draft vision and mission which outlines that, in future, the Council will live within its means.”

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